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# DRAMATIC CRITICISM

THREE LECTURES DELIVERED  
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BY

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# I

## THE IDEAL SPECTATOR



# DRAMATIC CRITICISM

## I

It is not to be gainsaid that the word "criticism" has gradually acquired a certain connotation of contempt. Indeed, one is sometimes tempted to wish that "criticism" and "critic" could be expunged from the dictionary, so lamentably misused as they are. Every one who expresses opinions, however imbecile, in print calls himself a "critic." The greater the ignoramus, the greater the likelihood of his posing as a "critic." The title has become as vulgar as "Professor," which Matthew Arnold modestly declined to share with Professor Pepper. But vulgarity, as we know, is sometimes a very different thing from popularity. It is significant that the vocabulary of daily life has never adopted the word "critic" as a term of endearment.

From the people whom the critic criticises it would be unreasonable to expect sympathy. When the rowdy baronet in Mr. Pinero's play felt particularly lively he always broke a valuable piece of porcelain, and it is an infallible sign of exuberant health in a popular actor when he says something sarcastic about the dramatic critics. There is a story in Bret Harte—or in Mark Twain—of a youthful convalescent in San Francisco about whom anxious inquirers were reassured by the information that “he was quite peart-like, heavin’ rocks at the Chinamen.” What the Chinamen were to this interesting invalid, the dramatic critics are to the popular actor—*hostes humani generis*—the mark for rocks, or any more handy missile. The dramatic critic's fellow-playgoers regard him as a wet blanket, a spoil-sport. They “know what they like,” as the phrase goes, and therefore they look askance at the man one of whose functions it is to persuade them that they do not know what they ought to like. This attitude has been illustrated in a question seriously debated by a club of

playgoers—"Are Dramatic Critics of any use?" But critics have been most sorely stricken in the house of their friends, that is to say, by authors and other critics. You have Dryden in the dedication of his "*Examen Poeticum*" declaring that "the corruption of a poet is the generation of a critic"—though here the whirligig of time has brought in his revenges, for Dryden himself is less rarely read to-day for his criticism than for his poetry. You have another critic, Addison, filling a whole *Spectator* paper with sarcasms against the dramatic critics. You have a third critic, Dr. Johnson, devoting two papers in the *Idler* to the satirical picture of the dramatic critic Dick Minim, and remarking that "Criticism is a study by which we grow important and formidable at a very small expense." The favourite, the classical, theory, however, of literary persons is that the critic is an author *manqué*. Coleridge said reviewers were "Usually people who would have been poets, historians, biographers, if they could; they have tried their talents at one or the other

and have failed ; therefore they turn critics." Shelley said : " As a bankrupt thief turns thief-taker in despair, so an unsuccessful author turns critic." Landor, in an Imaginary Conversation, made Porson tell Southey : " Those who have failed as writers turn reviewers." Balzac greatly vexed Saint-Beuve by saying of an unsuccessful sculptor that "*il passa critique comme tous les impuissants qui mentent à leurs débuts.*" In the same strain you have Lord Beaconsfield's epigram in "*Lothair*," "*Who are the critics? Those who have failed in literature and art.*"

Well, all this is very depressing, and, to recover a little tone, the critic naturally adopts the attitude of Shylock in the speech wherein he demonstrated to the Christians that he was a man and a brother. What people forget is that in this matter of criticism we are all tarred with the same brush. Just as one solid body cannot collide with another without the manifestation of a form of energy which we call heat, so one mind cannot impinge upon another without the manifestation of that form of energy which

we call criticism. Criticism is the means whereby art becomes conscious of its existence. Survey the playhouse and take a rapid poll of the audience. The millionaire in the stage box is politely stifling a yawn behind his kid-glove; Miss in the stalls is whispering to her Mamma that Sir Toby Belch seems very tipsy, and that anyhow it isn't half so funny as *Charley's Aunt*. The pit are shuffling their feet, and the gallery-boy is shouting "boo!" They are all "undulant and diverse," as Montaigne would say, and yet the whole audience have one thing in common; they are all dramatic critics—of the species known as "impressionist." As M. Jourdain spoke prose, so they are all producing criticism, without knowing it.

Still there is, of course, criticism and criticism, a right criticism and a wrong; criticism according to knowledge and good taste and criticism according to neither; the criticism of the *habiles* and the criticism of the *simples*, to use La Bruyère's classification. It must be our task to reduce, if we can, this chaos of opinion to

something like order, and to put our finger on the best opinion, the opinion of what we may call the ideal spectator. It is to this ideal spectator that the drama, as an art—we are not concerned here with the drama as merchandise, for that, no doubt, often finds itself addressed to a very different destination—it is to this ideal spectator that the drama as an art is addressed. Aristotle, the earliest and still the greatest of dramatic critics, made a great point of this ideal spectator. You will remember that it was Mr. Borthrop Trumbull, the auctioneer in “Middlemarch,” who conjectured that “the old masters were probably so called because they knew a thing or two more than the young ’uns.” This remark is certainly true about Aristotle, the oldest master, *il maestro di color che sanno*, the master of those who know. “As in ethics,” says Professor Butcher,<sup>1</sup> “Aristotle assumes a man of moral insight (ὁ φρόνιμος) to whose trained judgment the appreciation of ethical questions is

<sup>1</sup> “Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art,” 2nd-ed., p. 209.

submitted, and who, in the last resort, becomes the 'standard and the law' of right, so too in fine art a man of sound æsthetic interests (ὁ χαρίεις) is assumed, who is the standard of taste, and to him the final appeal is made." Now there is no need for playgoers to rise up and "conspuer" this ideal spectator—ὁ χαρίεις. We need none of us be in any hurry to hate him and abuse him as though he had robbed a church. For the fact is, he does not exist. He is like a point in pure geometry, an abstract conception. We call him the ideal spectator, or reader, or listener, just because he is not real. But he furnishes a convenient standard by which we can classify the tastes of real spectators, or readers, or listeners, and the nearest approximation to him will furnish us with our best opinion. To fix your ideas, to give yourselves an instance of an actual approximation to the character of Aristotle's χαρίεις, I think you cannot choose anything much better than Hazlitt's description of his friend Joseph Fawcett:—

"We find people of a decided and origi-

nal, and others of a more general and versatile, taste. I have sometimes thought that the most acute and original-minded men made bad critics. They see everything too much through a particular medium. What does not fall in with their own bias and mode of composition strikes them as commonplace and factitious. . . . The extreme force of their original impressions compared with the feebleness of those they receive at second-hand from others, over-sets the balance and just proportion of their minds. Men who have fewer native resources, and are obliged to apply oftener to the general stock, acquire by habit a greater aptitude in appreciating what they owe to others. Their taste is not made a sacrifice to their egotism and vanity, and they enrich the soil of their minds with continual accessions of borrowed strength and beauty. I might take this opportunity of observing, that the person of the most refined and least contracted taste I ever knew was the late Joseph Fawcett, the friend of my youth. He was almost the first literary acquaintance I ever made, and



I think the most candid and unsophisticated. He had a masterly perception of all styles and of every kind and degree of excellence, sublime or beautiful, from Milton's 'Paradise Lost' to Shenstone's 'Pastoral Ballad,' from Butler's 'Analogy' down to 'Humphrey Clinker.' If you had a favourite author, he had read him too, and knew all the best morsels, the subtle *traits*, the capital touches. 'Do you like Sterne?'—'Yes, to be sure,' he would say. 'I should deserve to be hanged if I didn't!' His repeating some parts of 'Comus' with his fine, deep, mellow-toned voice, particularly the lines, 'I have heard my mother Circe with the Sirens three,' &c., and the enthusiastic comments he made afterwards, were a feast to the ear and to the soul. He read the poetry of Milton with the same fervour and spirit of devotion that I have since heard others read their own. 'That is the most delicious feeling of all,' I have heard him exclaim, 'to like what is excellent, no matter whose it is.' In this respect he practised what he preached. He was incapable of harbouring a sinister motive,

and judged only from what he felt. There was no flaw or mist in the clear mirror of his mind. He was as open to impressions as he was strenuous in maintaining them. He did not care a rush whether a writer was old or new, in prose or in verse—‘What he wanted,’ he said, ‘was something to make him think.’ Most men’s minds are to me like musical instruments out of tune. Touch a particular key, and it jars and makes harsh discord with your own. They like ‘Gil Blas,’ but can see nothing to laugh at in ‘Don Quixote’; they adore Richardson, but are disgusted with Fielding. Fawcett had a taste accommodated to all these. He was not exceptionous. He gave a cordial welcome to all sorts, provided that they were the best in their kind. He was not fond of counterfeits or duplicates. . . . His character was frank and ingenuous in the extreme. . . . A heartier friend or honester critic I never coped withal.”

There you have the Aristotelian *χαλκός* in the library—the ideal consumer of literary art. He is “not exceptionous” but catholic,

with "a masterly perception of all styles and of every kind and degree of excellence." His mind is "a clear mirror." He is open to impressions, and strenuous in maintaining them—a lively receptivity, as we say, and a strong enthusiasm—"wax to receive and marble to retain." And now the question arises, Where precisely is such a one, or the closest approximation to such a one, to be found in the playhouse? Very diverse answers to this question have been given by more or less interested parties. According to a familiar, though apocryphal story, Molière sought his ideal consumer of drama in his cook. For him *ὁ χαρὴς* resided in the kitchen. A popular American actor-manager, Mr. William Gillette, who as the impersonator of Sherlock Holmes ought to be infallible at detective work, has identified *ὁ χαρὴς* with the man in the street. The only critic, he says, whose opinion he respects is the average spectator. For Tolstoy, on the other hand, the ideal consumer of art is the *moujik*—"a respected, wise, educated country labourer," he says (in his "What is Art?")—"one, for in-

stance, of those wise and truly religious men whom I know among the peasants." And, again, you have Mr. Augustine Birrell urging the claim of the cultivated amateur: "I have had some experience of authors, and have always found them better pleased with the 'unprofessional' verdicts of educated men actively engaged in the work of the world than ever they were with the laboured praise of the so-called 'expert.'" There are yet other people who maintain that the ideal consumer of any art is the producer of it; that the proper critic of drama is the dramatist, of acting is the actor. I think these various suggestions pretty well exhaust our possible range of choice, and it will perhaps clear up our ideas if we examine them in turn.

First of all, then, there is the average spectator, the man in the pit, representing the typical mind and taste of the crowd. The crowd must always be mentioned first, *honoris causâ*, in any discussion touching the drama, because it is to an assembled crowd that the drama is addressed. That

is the peculiarity which makes drama what it is and not something else, not a novel or an essay or a meditation or a fragment of history or an exercise in pure dialectic. And we must deal respectfully with the playhouse crowd, because it is nothing less than the British nation, or, to speak by the card, that respectable minority of the British nation which goes to the play. We must beware of committing what J. R. Green said was Froude's great fault, that in a history of England he had omitted the English people.

At the same time, the English crowd is a crowd, and we have to consider for the moment the mind of the crowd in general, of the crowd as a crowd. The great point about the crowd—by which I mean any body of men and women assembled together for a common purpose—is that it has a mind and character of its own which differ from the mind and character of its individual members. Collective psychology, as the phrase goes, has only of late years seriously engaged the attention of scientific inquirers. A little band of Frenchmen,

headed by Professor Tarde of Paris, have taken up this study, with results which, interesting though they are, it would be here out of place to describe at length.

And so I must ask you to be good enough to take it for granted that a crowd forms a new entity, with a mind and character of its own; that it differs from the individuals composing it just as our bodies are unlike the cells of which they are made up, or just as a chemical combination is unlike its separate ingredients. The reason, very roughly stated, is, perhaps, this. The qualities in which the members of a crowd differ from one another disappear, are mutually cancelled, while the qualities which they have in common are intensified by contact. The qualities in which men differ, are principally, of course, the conscious elements of character, the fruit of education, of varying hereditary conditions, and the intelligence. The qualities, on the other hand, in which they resemble one another are principally the unconscious or subconscious qualities, the primary instincts, feelings, and passions

of the race. (It follows that to bring people together in a crowd is to diminish their intellectual and to increase their emotional energy.) And so when Thackeray talked of "that great baby, the public," he was really touching a scientific truth. The crowd has the credulity, the absence of judicial faculty, the uncontrolled violence of feeling of a child. Shakespeare knew this when he drew the crowd in *Julius Cæsar*; Ibsen also, when he drew the crowd in *An Enemy of Society*; yes, and in another way, Mr. Gilbert knew it too, when he drew his little crowd of "Twelve good men and true" in *Trial by Jury*. And this general truth is true in particular of the theatrical crowd. The theatrical crowd is not philosophic; it cannot adopt a detached, impersonal, disinterested view of life; it must take sides. Hence the stage convention of the "sympathetic personage." The theatrical crowd has not the judicial faculty, is not accustomed to sift evidence or to estimate probabilities. Hence the convention of "The long arm of coincidence," and another convention—at

least as old as Sophocles — that any, the wildest improbability, may be taken for the postulate, the starting-point of a play. When *Œdipus the King* comes on the stage he has been married for twelve years to his own mother, and throughout all that time she has never had a talk with him on the past which gives him any suspicion of who she is or of the fact that he has slain his own father. A crowd *as* a crowd is virtuous and generous; for we are all on our best behaviour in public. Hear the gallery at a theatre of melodrama hiss the villain! Yet it is fairly long odds that some of them have robbed their employers, and that others will go home to beat their wives. And the crowd insists upon a strict separation of virtue and vice. It wants its personages all of a piece. The composite characters, the strange blend of good and evil in all of us, it refuses to recognise. Hence the convention of “hero” and “traitor,” of “immaculate heroine” and “viperine adventuress,” of “poetic justice,” and of “living happy ever afterwards.”



You conclude that by the mere fact of forming part of an organised crowd a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation. Isolated, he may be a harmless citizen, a placid British vestryman; in a crowd he becomes a barbarian, a Berserker; he "throws back" to his early ancestors. Note the effect on the theatre. "It is only the life of violence," says Maeterlinck, "the life of bygone days, that is perceived by nearly all our tragic writers; and truly one may say that anachronism dominates the stage, and that dramatic art dates back as many years as the art of sculpture. . . . To the tragic author it is only the violence of the anecdote that appeals. . . . And he imagines, forsooth, that we shall delight in witnessing the very same acts that brought joy to the hearts of the barbarians, with whom murder, outrage, and treachery were matters of daily occurrence. Whereas, it is far away from bloodshed, battle-cry, and sword-thrust that the lives of most of us flow on, and men's tears are silent to-day, and invisible and almost

spiritual. . . . Indeed, when I go to a theatre I feel as though I were spending a few hours with my ancestors, who conceived life as something that was primitive, arid, and brutal; but this conception of theirs scarcely even lingers in my memory, and surely it is not one that I can share. I am shown a deceived husband killing his wife, a woman poisoning her lover, a son avenging his father, a father slaughtering his children, children putting their father to death, murdered kings, ravished virgins, imprisoned citizens—in a word, all the sublimity of tradition, but, alas, how superficial and material! Blood, surface-tears, and death!”

All this, I think you will admit, takes us very far from *ὁ χάρις*. The collective mind, the mind of the crowd, approximates rather to the mind of primitive man.

Further, it is peculiarly apt to be an inattentive mind. A contributor to one of the monthly reviews<sup>1</sup> has maintained

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Aria in the *Nineteenth Century and After*, July 1902.

that "half the people in the theatre do not listen to the play; they do not go to the theatre for that purpose, and it is almost impossible to persuade them to do so. They go there for some extraneous reason far removed from a desire to follow what is proceeding on the stage, and they give their attention either not at all, or in the most perfunctory fashion."

Allowing for a slight touch of exaggeration in the statement, we ought, from the considerations I have been submitting to you, to succeed in accounting for what remains of truth in it. A crowd, having an individuality of its own, cannot but be interested in that individuality, apart from all reference to the cause which has brought it together. The crowd finds itself an interesting spectacle. From the moment of its formation it becomes self-conscious, self-assertive. To absorb its attention—that is to say, to make it forget its own existence—is an extremely difficult feat. How many platform orators, how many speakers in the House of Commons, how many preachers, how many

actors, can do this? So few in any generation that the whole generation knows their names. In his preface to *Le Fils Naturel* the younger Dumas compared the theatre in this respect with the church. "Like the church," he said, "we dramatists address ourselves to men assembled together, and you cannot gain the ear of the multitude for any length of time or in any efficacious way save in the name of their higher interests." The "inattention," then, of the crowd is proof of the independence and the potency of its existence. It is not really inattentive; on the contrary its attention is of the keenest, but it is directed to itself. Hence the perpetual difficulty of all arts which, like the art of the theatre, involve the presence of a crowd. (The crowd has assembled because it is interested in the particular art, but, once assembled, it finds another subject of interest and a dangerous rival to the artistic subject—namely, itself.)

We might perhaps find an additional reason for the inattention of the theatrical

crowd in the temperament of the typical playgoer. Clearly, your typical playgoer is not a reading man, a cloistered student, a "solitary," as our forefathers used to say. He belongs, *ex hypothesi*, to the class which is "fond of company"; he would not, even if he could, imitate Macaulay by reading Plato with his feet on the fender; he must have bustle, the sense of human kinship brought home to him by sitting elbow to elbow with his neighbour; he desires to see and be seen. The faculty of intellectual attention is seldom high in such a temperament as this. Moreover, the large majority of a modern theatrical audience consists of women; and it is accurate, I am afraid, if ungallant, to say that women are the less attentive sex. Schoolmasters who have taken "mixed classes" tell us that it is harder to fix the attention of their girls than of their boys. The proof of this in the theatre is that the parts of the house where the women outnumber the men—the stalls, boxes, and circle—are notoriously less attentive than the pit and gallery, where the men outnumber the women.) Nor must

we forget that ladies in public have something else to do than merely to attend. They are on parade, they constitute a show in themselves—very often a more charming show than anything offered on the other side of the footlights. You must frequently have been seated behind a *matinée* hat which was better worth looking at than the play of which it allowed an occasional glimpse. The argument, then, comes to this: first, that all crowds, because they are crowds, are inattentive—or, more properly speaking, self-attentive—a fact which constitutes a formidable difficulty for all arts which depend upon the crowd; secondly, that the theatrical crowd is peculiarly inattentive, because it is drawn from the classes whose power of attention is naturally low. . . . And you perceive that we are getting further and further from *ὁ χαρίεις*.

But when you have fixed the attention of the crowd, how does that attention work? The mental state of the theatrical audience, as Coleridge has pointed out, closely resembles that of a man in a dream. In a dream you live an imaginary life as though

it were real, and yet all the time you have a sub-consciousness that it is not real, you know vaguely all the time that you are only dreaming. So, says Coleridge, "Stage-presentations are to produce a sort of temporary half-faith, which the spectator encourages in himself and supports by a voluntary contribution on his own part, because he knows that it is at all times in his power to see the thing as it really is. Thus the true stage-illusion as to a forest scene consists—not in the mind's judging it to be a forest, but in its remission of the judgment that it is not a forest." The mental state, in fact, is half-way between two extremes, absolute non-illusion and complete delusion.

Of the first of these extremes you may take an illustration from Tolstoy's account of a visit to *Siegfried*. "When I arrived," he says, "an actor sat on the stage amid decorations intended to represent a cave, and which, as is always the case, produced the less illusion the better they were constructed. He was dressed in woven tights, with a cloak of skins, wore a wig and an

artificial beard, and with white, weak, genteel hands (his easy movements, and especially the shape of his stomach and his lack of muscle, revealed the actor) beat an impossible sword with an unnatural hammer in a way in which no one ever uses a hammer; and at the same time opening his mouth in a strange way, he sang something incomprehensible." There you have absolute non-illusion: an unsympathetic detachment of the spectator's mind. And now, for the other extreme state of mind, consider some passages from Addison's account of Sir Roger de Coverley's behaviour at a performance of *The Distrest Mother*. "Upon the entering of Pyrrhus, the Knight told me," says Addison, "that he did not believe the King of France himself had a better strut. I was indeed very attentive to my old friend's remarks, because I looked upon them as a piece of natural criticism, and was well pleased to hear him at the conclusion of almost every scene telling me that he could not imagine how the play would end. One while he appeared much concerned for Andromache,



and a little while after as much for Hermione; and was extremely puzzled to think what would become of Pyrrhus. . . .

“When Sir Roger saw Andromache’s obstinate refusal to her Lover’s importunities, he whisper’d me in the Ear, that he was sure she would never have him; to which he added, with a more than ordinary vehemence, ‘You can’t imagine, Sir, what ’tis to have to do with a Widow.’ Upon Pyrrhus his threatening afterwards to leave her, the Knight shook his Head, and muttered to himself, ‘Ay, do if you can.’ This part dwelt so much upon my friend’s imagination, that at the close of the Third Act, as I was thinking of something else, he whispered in my Ear, ‘These widows, Sir, are the most perverse Creatures in the World.’ . . . Upon Hermione’s going off with a Menace to Pyrrhus, the Audience gave a loud Clap; to which Sir Roger added, ‘On my word, a notable young Baggage!’” There you have complete delusion: wholly sympathetic absorption of the spectator’s mind.

The mind of the crowd, of the average

spectator, is, as we have seen, somewhere between these two extremes. Now what is the state of mind of the ideal spectator, of ὁ χαρίεις? It is a rather complicated state, a state of double consciousness. There is a French proverb which says that you cannot at once join in a procession and look out of the window. Yet it is a feat of that kind which the ideal theatrical spectator has to accomplish, for remember that he is not only taking in pleasure with a complete self-surrender, he is also commanding himself so as to estimate the quality of his pleasure—while it is coming in. He must have a mental detachment as absolute as Tolstoy's at *Siegfried*—but, unlike Tolstoy's, it must be sympathetic detachment—with a sympathy as whole-hearted as Sir Roger's at *The Distrest Mother*. This by no means easy mental process requires not only an effort of the will, a special motive, but training and special aptitude. It is out of the question to look for this from the crowd.

Ὁ χαρίεις, then, the ideal spectator at the

play is not the crowd, is not the average spectator, whether Molière's cook—even though Molière's cook was that superior article a French cook—or Tolstoy's Russian peasant, or the man who naïvely asks if dramatic critics are of any use.

After the crowd, the average or uncultivated amateur, let us turn to Mr. Birrell's candidate for the critical post—the man of affairs or of the world who dabbles in the arts; in other words, the amateur of culture. Mr. Birrell puts in a very artful plea for this class. He says the authors like them, preferring their “verdicts of approval” to the “laboured praise of the so-called ‘expert.’” Here, however, we must be on our guard against the rhetorical device of the professional advocate—the familiar device of comparing one thing at its best with another thing at its worst. The praise of the “expert” is not necessarily “laboured.” And you will observe that the authors like the men of the world when they deliver “verdicts of approval.” What the authors think of this class when they deliver verdicts of disapproval we are not told.

However, I willingly admit there is something very seductive in the idea of every cultivated gentleman being his own critic—though there is a little treatise called “Every man his own lawyer,” which Mr. Birrell, I expect, regards with some suspicion. Criticism from that point of view is very much like the game of golf—which is said to be as good for the duffer as for the expert, and especially good for the middle-aged and even elderly. It is a notion which particularly recommends itself to us English—who are governed by amateurs. That, in fact, is part and parcel of the British Constitution. Small wonder, then, that we should take as quite a natural thing the *obiter dicta* of the amateur in the comparatively humble region of the arts. But here I think we must distinguish. It would be inaccurate, as well as impertinent, to label the critical writings or discourses of such men as Mr. Gladstone or Mr. Balfour or Lord Rosebery—names which at once occur to everybody’s mind in this connection—as amateurish. Whatever else they were or are, these men were or are men of letters,

serious students of their subject. When we refer to the amateur of culture, we are thinking of a class opposed to the literary class, the mundane people, a class which has not the patience or the leisure or the aptitude for serious study of the arts, their history, their laws, their logic, a class to which the arts are a pastime, and nothing but a pastime. Now the criticism of these mundane people is always worth listening to, just as is the criticism of the man in the street. For it is a criticism which is, at any rate, free from the literary bias, from the cant of criticism, from the smell of the lamp. It seldom fails to give us a fresh and suggestive view of the subject. But does it give us the right view? I am afraid not. For though it is free from the literary, the professional bias, it has a bias of its own—which is either the bias of the individual or the bias of the mode. As for the bias of the individual, you get that in the men of autocratic temper—who take their own subjective opinions for the measure of universal truth. This bias is illustrated by Lord Foppington in *The Relapse*, who

preferred the "natural sprouts" of his own brain to the "forced products" of another man's. This bias is also illustrated by the opinions of George II. on "bainting and boetry," of George III. on "that sad stuff, Shakespeare," of Frederick the Great on epic poetry, which, he declared, reached its highest pinnacle in Voltaire's "Henriade," and by the opinions of an illustrious successor of Frederick's on every art under the sun. It is perhaps permissible to suggest that the artistic views of that illustrious monarch, interesting and instructive as they are to the historian and the student of character, are not exactly the opinions of the Aristotelian *χρίεις*. Then as to the bias of the mode, everybody knows how fashion rules the mundane amateur — fashion, the most changeable, the most relative to time and place, the least reasonable thing in the world. At one time the mundane amateur is all for "Grecian marbles," at another he is all for the paintings of Domenichino or Sir Thomas Lawrence. To be sure fashion sometimes makes a good shot: Garrick became the

fashion at once. But it is at haphazard. The fashionable people, the mundane amateurs, who made the vogue of Kean, also made the vogue of Master Betty. There are no settled principles of judgment here.

And there is another subdivision of the cultivated amateur, not the mundane sort, but the intellectual sort—no doubt the sort which Mr. Birrell has in mind—which is quite as unfitted to run a successful candidate for the post of ideal spectator. “Probably there is nothing,” said the late Mr. Grant Allen, “which serious intellects hate so much as an intellectual treat! To be made to sit out a performance at the Français or the Lyceum would be to a great many of us an unmitigated bore. I believe high-class music, high-class plays, high-class novels are produced mainly for people of moderate or medium intelligence; people whose brains and bodies are systematically underworked. Men who have done a good day’s toil with head or hands don’t care for *Faust*: they want a Gaiety burlesque. The silliest

song, the most rollicking fun, of the Café Chantants in the Champs Elysées or of the London Pavilion, is to many intelligent men a far greater relaxation than the best-mounted piece of Shakespeare's or Victor Hugo's. Or rather, the one is a relaxation and the other a nuisance." Well, we can all understand that point of view, and, in certain moods, sympathise with it; but at the same time we can all see that it is not the point of view of the ideal spectator, of *ὁ χαρίεις* at the play.

And now we have done with the amateur, whether of the street or of the *salon*, whether intellectual or mundane, and must look for our ideal spectator in quite another quarter. It is often said that the ideal consumer of drama, or of any other art, is the producer of it. The proper judges, that is, of pictures are painters, of novels are novelists, of plays are playwrights, and of acting are actors.

"Let such teach others who themselves excel,  
And censure others who have written well,"

says Pope in his "Essay on Criticism." This is a very plausible contention, which



has hoodwinked many worthy people. For here, also, we have a notion which reflects the English spirit: trial by jury, judgment by our peers. And if criticism were a mode of technical instruction, a piece of didactic, the contention would, no doubt, be a perfectly sound one. I will go further and insist that, whenever we say that this or that play is bad, this or that picture ill-painted, this or that symphony poorly orchestrated, we ought always to bear in mind the difficulties of the artist's task and to remember that these things which he has failed to do well we, very likely, cannot do at all. That is a chastening reflection, a salutary moral exercise; but though it may prompt us to charity, it ought not to affect our ultimate verdict. John Dennis effectively answered Pope that his precept "is denied by matter of fact, and by the experience of above two thousand years."<sup>1</sup> On this point, as on so many others, we get something decisive from the strong common-sense of Samuel Johnson. Boswell

<sup>1</sup> "Reflections upon a late Rhapsody call'd, An Essay upon Criticism; by Mr. Dennis."

had collaborated with two other friends in writing a pamphlet entitled "Critical Strictures" against Mallet's tragedy of *Elvira*; but one of the friends had misgivings, and said, "We have hardly a right to abuse this tragedy: for bad as it is, how vain should either of us be to write one not near so good." Then Johnson broke in, "Why, no, sir; this is not just reasoning. You may abuse a tragedy, though you cannot write one. You may scold a carpenter who has made you a bad table, though you cannot make a table. It is not your trade to make tables."<sup>1</sup>

So it is not the dramatic critic's trade to make plays, or to teach the way to make plays. It is the function of criticism not to inculcate methods, but to appraise results; to examine the thing done, not the way to do it. It is, in short, the evaluation of pleasurable impressions; and to receive these impressions, we must have a perfectly open mind—a clear mirror, as Hazlitt said of Joseph Fawcett. Now your actual, your so-called "creative," artist is too narrow

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Birbeck Hill's edition of Boswell, vol. i. p. 409.

and too intense for that. The very force within him which gives the impulse to creation is fatal to catholicity of taste. His "personal equation," as the astronomers call it, will not permit him to be an accurate observer. Every critical preference he expresses is really a veiled justification of himself. As Stendhal said, every eulogy between *confrère* and *confrère* is a certificate of resemblance. Of this you will find an amusing instance in Aubrey de Vere's Reminiscences of Tennyson in early days:

"‘Read the exquisite songs of Burns,’ Tennyson exclaimed. ‘In shape, each of them has the perfection of the berry, in light the radiance of the dew-drop: you forget for its sake those stupid things, his serious pieces.’ The same day,” continues Aubrey de Vere, “I met Wordsworth and named Burns to *him*. Wordsworth praised him even more vehemently than Tennyson had done; but added, ‘Of course I refer to his serious efforts; those foolish little amatory songs of his one has to forget.’ I told the tale to Henry Taylor the same

evening, and his answer was: 'Burns' exquisite songs and Burns' serious efforts are to me alike tedious and disagreeable reading.'"

These are authors when they praise, but when they don't! You know what Corneille thought of Racine; what Richardson thought of Fielding and what Fielding of Richardson; what Borrow and Peacock, two very different authors, agreed in thinking about a third author, Walter Scott; what Byron said of Keats; what Macready thought of Charles Kean and Charles Kean of Macready; what Beaconsfield said of Thackeray, and Charlotte Brontë of Jane Austen.

And then there is the trite but inevitable remark, that the nature which invents and combines—the faculty of the so-called "creative" artist—is widely different—though I hope to persuade you later that it is by no means totally different—from the nature which enjoys and analyses—the critical faculty. But there is really no need to argue the point. It was settled, once and for all, by the excellent, the invaluable Aristotle, in Book III. ch. ii. of his "Poli-

tics," where you may read: "Thus it is not the builder alone whose function it is to criticise the merits of a house; the person who uses it, to wit, the householder, is actually a better judge; and, similarly, a pilot is a better judge of a helm than a carpenter; or one of the company of a dinner than the cook."

## II

# THE DRAMATIC CRITIC

## II

THE way ought now to be clear for a consideration of the expert playgoer, the so-called dramatic critic. I have pointed out that we are all critics in a sense—criticism being the reaction of mind against mind, the opinion of the consumer about the work of art which the producer offers him—and I have postulated, after Aristotle, and indeed not only after Aristotle, but in accordance with common-sense and the nature of things, an ideal consumer, the man of the perfect taste and the right opinion, whom Aristotle calls *ὁ χαρίεις*. We have examined how far and in what way the several classes among consumers of drama diverged from this standard, the ideal consumer. There is the representative of the crowd, with the marked limitations imposed by the mental conditions peculiar to crowds. There is the cultivated

amateur, whether mundane or intellectual, with his limitations, which, for the mundane amateur, are the caprice of fashion in artistic taste, and the fact that art is for him only a pastime, just as it is only a pastime, a rest from brain-fag, for a certain sort of intellectual amateur. We have scrutinised the claims of the producer himself, the playwright or the actor, to be the nearest approximation to the Aristotelian *χαρίεις* in the theatre, and we have rejected the claims of the producer because his own special artistic individuality is of necessity so strong as to colour his general ideas, and to disqualify him from forming a broad and balanced judgment. Still, these classes are all critics in their way. They are *vivâ voce* critics; and they are irresponsible critics, caring not a rush for antiquity or posterity, or for anything beyond their pleasure of the moment. And remember that this floating mass of irresponsible *vivâ voce* criticism is enormously important to the producers of art; for, one way or another, it is the criticism which settles their hash. Authors complain of the se-

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verity or captiousness, or even malice, of what is written about them by the responsible "official" critics; but if they only heard what is said about them by the irresponsible *vivâ voce* critics!

We come now, then, to the class of critics properly so called, who differ from all these other classes in that it is their business not only, like the others, to enjoy, but to appraise and to justify their enjoyment. And this appraising and justification have to be made systematic and to be presented in literary form. Hence the critics proper are in the peculiar position of being at once consumers and producers; they are consumers of one art, the art of drama, and producers of another art, the art of criticism. In other words, the critic has something more to do than to approximate as closely as may be to the ideal spectator—though that to be sure is a very important, perhaps the fundamental, part of his task—he has, over and above that, to be an artist. This claim of criticism to be an art is viewed with some jealousy by other artists, who are fond of

making the distinction that their arts—the poem, the novel, the play—are “creative” arts, whereas criticism is not “creation.” This distinction, I cannot but think, is shallow and lamentably unscientific. Science teaches us that there is no such thing as creation; only change, transmutation. But accepting the word “creation,” we must apply it to all producers of literary art, whether they be poets or novelists or playwrights or critics. They are all creators, and what they all create is æsthetic feeling. And the raw material out of which they all create this is the same, namely, themselves. Criticism, like any other art—whatever else it may be—is a mode of self-expression. M. Anatole France has given a famous description of criticism as “The adventures of a soul among masterpieces,” and he has added: “In order to be frank, the critic ought to say; Gentlemen, I am about to speak of myself *à propos* of Shakespeare, or Racine, or Pascal, or Goethe—by no means a bad opportunity.” Let us have done, then, with this false old criterion of “creation” as a

pretext for giving the name of art to the Adventures of Robinson Crusoe or of Harry Richmond, and withholding it from the Adventures of a Soul among Masterpieces.

To see what nonsense this criterion really is, you need only take the case of Dryden. Are we seriously to be told that while Dryden in his *Wild Gallant*, or in his *All for Love*, or in his *Spanish Friar* was doing creative work, he was not, forsooth, doing creative work in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*? Why, the very scheme of this beautiful piece, the contrast of a pure classic gem against a rich romantic setting, is, in itself, a creation. "It was that memorable day, in the first summer of the late war, when our navy engaged the Dutch; a day wherein the two most mighty and best appointed fleets which any age had ever seen, disputed the command of the greater half of the globe, the commerce of nations, and the riches of the universe. . . . The noise of the cannons from both navies reached our ears about the City, so that all men being alarmed

with it, and in a dreadful suspense of the event which we knew was then deciding, every one went following the sound as his fancy led him ; . . . all seeking the noise in the depths of silence." . . . And so four gentlemen in long perruques, magnificent creatures, took a barge and waited to begin talking until the rush of waters under London Bridge was out of their ears and, getting towards Greenwich, they could order the watermen to let fall their oars more gently. And what could these courtly gentlemen find better to talk about than dramatic criticism? What the drama is, and was, and may some day be, and what are the Three Unities, and whether rhyme or blank verse is better for tragedy, and whether the Ancients surpass the Moderns and the French the English, and what is to be thought of Terence his plots and of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher and Ben Jonson. And, then, how artfully the plot of this critical drama is related to the scenic background, so that the very swallows which skim the water ahead of the barge are pressed into service to give

a simile for the literary points of some poet under discussion! And by-and-by the watermen are bidden to turn the barge and row softly, that the party may take the cool of the evening in their return; and the talk flows on, as abundant and as richly laden as the river itself, and the boom of the Dutch guns has now given place to the serene wisdom of Aristotle—the thought of whom among those peri-wigs suggests a Grecian marble over against a Sir Peter Lely. And so rapt were these gentlemen in their discourse that it was not until they had been twice or thrice called to, that they saw the barge had stopped, and they were back at the foot of Somerset stairs. And then there is the choice little final kinematograph:—"The company stood a-while looking back on the water, which the moonbeams played upon, and made it appear like floating quick-silver; at last they went up through a crowd of French people, who were merrily dancing in the open air, and nothing concerned for the noise of guns which had alarmed the town that afternoon."

What an exquisite blend of frank "impressionism" and academic theory, of the circumstance of the moment and the eternal verities, of Pepysian London and the Athens of the greater Peripatetic! It is because of the special quality of this blend, its peculiar "thrill"—the Hellenisation, so to speak, of a London day—that I cannot resist the temptation of setting beside this Essay of Dryden's a passage from one of Edward FitzGerald's Letters, where he describes to a friend a jaunt he had in town with James Spedding, the learned editor of Bacon:—

"The most pleasurable remembrance I had of my stay in town," writes FitzGerald, "was the last day I spent there, having a long ramble in the streets with Spedding, looking at books and pictures; then a walk with him and Carlyle across the Park to Chelsea, where we dropped that Latter Day Prophet at his house; then, getting upon a steamer, smoked down to Westminster; dined at a chop-house by the Bridge, and then went to Astley's; old Spedding being quite as wise about the

Horsemanship as about Bacon and Shakespeare. We parted at midnight in Covent-Garden; and this whole pleasant day has left a taste on my palate like one of Plato's lighter, easier, and more picturesque dialogues."

It is when we come to recognise that the critic is himself an artist, in his way, that we see the full extent of fatuity in the question, "What is the *use* of Dramatic Criticism?" The use of any art is as a channel for the communication of ideas and emotions between man and man. It is a mode by which the producer of the art shares out his moods, his soul-states, his views of life, with the consumer. This is what is meant in popular language by "being interesting." Just as you may have an interesting novel or an interesting play, so you may have an "interesting" dramatic criticism. And that is the use of it.

Well, the peculiar position, the *differentia*, of the critic proper results from the fact that he has to be not only consumer but producer, not only observer

but artist. It is that which chiefly distinguishes him from the other critics whom we have passed in review—from the man in the street, the connoisseur, and the rest of them—in a word, from the public. Not that his attitude, merely as an observer, a consumer, is quite the same as theirs. We have noted the contagious influence of the crowd and its results. Now, just as the able theatre-manager is he who allows for that contagious influence, is indeed a kind of professional incendiary, always watching when he can set the crowd on fire, so the critic is the one man in the theatre whose business it is to react against the crowd, to “sit tight,” as the phrase goes, and to preserve the independence of his personal judgment, the captaincy of his soul. He has to be on his guard, too, against those caprices of literary fashion which sway the mundane amateur, and, on the other hand, against that professional bias which influences the actual producer of drama, be he playwright or player. But, as I say, the main dif-



ference between the critic proper and the public at large is the consequence of the peculiar position of the critic as being himself an artist.

This disagreement between critics and public is a subject which nobody seems to be in danger of forgetting. Whenever an instance of it occurs the critics' good-natured friends—they have many at such moments—sedulously improve the occasion. “Well, you see you were wrong in ‘slating’ So-and-so’s piece; the advertisements already announce its hundredth night.” Or, “What on earth did you mean by praising that rubbish at the Frivolity? Why, it didn’t run a week!” The genial implication in either case is that the critic has been an ass for his pains. But any one who has ever thought the matter over knows that talk of this kind is nothing to the purpose. Take, for an historic instance, the disagreement between critics and public in mid-eighteenth century. While English critics of the Chesterfield type were learning to praise French “regularity,” a French critic

like Diderot could wax enthusiastic over the "irregular, rugged, and wild air of the English genius." But there was no mutual concession of this kind on the part of the two publics. Between the critical and the public attitude Mrs. Centlivre (in her preface to *Love's Con-trivance*) had already made a practical distinction:—

"The critics cavil most about decorums, and cry up Aristotle's rules, as the most essential part of the play. I own they are in the right of it; yet I dare venture they'll never persuade the town to be of their opinion."

The plain truth is that the playgoer who is merely seeking his pleasure and the playgoer who has to appraise and to justify his pleasure of necessity take somewhat different views. For the one there is the sole question, Am I pleased? For the other there is that question too, but coupled with another question—a question which, by the way, was one of Matthew Arnold's many borrowings from Sainte-Beuve—Am I right to be pleased?

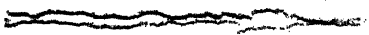
Stendhal's precept, "Interroge-toi quand tu ris," is nothing to the public, but it is everything to the critic. Or the public may say, "we were bored," and forget the play as quickly as they can. The critics have to say why they are bored, and that is a bore, so that they are sure to be less charitable to a bad play than the public. The wound is kept open. Then it has to be remembered that good plays, plays which rightly please the public, often make bad "copy"—that is to say, unworkable material—for the critic. A play that presents no variation of type may be interesting enough in itself, but vexes the critic, to whom it offers no "purchase." And, to go a little further into technical particulars, there are certain classes of play—for example, melodramas and farces—which always come out worse on paper than on the boards. The critic is generally tempted to describe melodrama by the ironic method—which is a perfidy—and to narrate the plot of a farce is, at the best, to decant champagne. It is for a kindred reason that the "drama of ideas"

is apt to be overpraised in print—which is a good medium for ideas. In brief, criticism, being a form of literature, can do justice to the literary elements in drama; but in drama there are many other elements, and criticism is often at fault with these, because of a purely technical difficulty, the difficulty of transposing the effects of one art into the effects of another. Criticism can give the reader a very fair idea of *Hamlet* or *Paolo and Francesca*, of *Le Demi-Monde* or *A Doll's House*, of *Iris* or *The Admirable Crichton*. It can give only an inadequate account of the pleasure afforded by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *La Locandiera* or *L'Enfant Prodigue*. With *Box and Cox* or *Charley's Aunt* it can do nothing.

And we have seen the reason why. It is because the critic, like the piece of furniture in Goldsmith's poem, has "a double debt to pay"; because he is at once consumer and producer, at once parasite and independent, substantive artist. In the very act of describing and appraising the methods of another art he has to follow the methods,

the very different methods, of his own. A criticism is a picture with its own laws of perspective and composition and "values," and the play which furnishes the subject for this picture has more often than not to be "humoured" a little, stretched here and squeezed there, in order to fit into the design. The salient points in the pattern of the play may not suit the salient points in the pattern of the criticism—though, no doubt, the good critic is he who most often gets the two sets into perfect coincidence. The critic must have his "general idea," his leading theme, which gives his criticism its unity, something to hold it together. This general idea, however legitimately it may have been derived from the play criticised, will very likely get exaggerated, will assume a much more important part in the criticism than it actually did in the play itself. Or the critic may take some significant phrase or catchword of the play as a "refrain" for his article, or he may perform a *fantasia* on some leading theme of the play (for example, the "nose" theme in *Cyrano de Bergerac*), until he has ex-

hausted all its possible permutations and combinations. These are devices permissible in criticism, because criticism is literature, an art intended to interest, to give pleasure, in itself; but their effect is to warp the genuine first-hand impression of the play, to alter its proportions. Thus criticism tends to systematise what may not be systematic, to follow out its own logic and to expand its own formulas, rather than to conform strictly to the outline and proportions of the thing criticised. That is so, because, in a sense, all art is not only a transformation but a deformation of its subject-matter. It is the old difficulty of the portrait painter. The sitter asks, "Is it like?"; the connoisseur, "Is it a good piece of painting?" There are whole elements of a play which are ignored by the critic, for the simple reason that they will not work into his scheme. One has even heard of cases where the name of some meritorious actor has been passed over in silence, because mention of it would spoil the hang of the critic's sentence; but that is immoral.



One must not be lured into betraying all the secrets of the craft. Enough has been said, perhaps, to show why the critic and the public differ in their opinions of the same thing, and why this difference is widened in the very process by which the critic records his opinions. It is often widened still further by what may seem a purely mechanical accident—the interval of time which elapses between the critic's impression and his record of it. The objection is often raised against "first night" criticism, that it is bound to be hasty, undigested, more or less of an improvisation. Apart from the fact that newspaper readers, in any case, insist upon having it, I believe that it is on the whole the criticism most advantageous to the play. The critic's sensations are vivid, his mind is full of his subject, he still has the proportions and details of the play in his eye. Writing after an interval, he is apt to remember his general impression of the play rather than the play itself, and his impression has lost in truth by the fading of minor detail, to the consequent exaggeration.

tion of a few prominent features—a process which may lead the most conscientious critic to unconscious caricature.

Now I trust I have not been showing you a glimpse of the critic at work without at the same time suggesting to you his professional drawbacks, his besetting sins. For one thing, I have said that he has often to give an appearance of system to subject-matter which is not really systematic. And so he is apt to become what Joe Gargery would call too “architectooralooral.” Then again, having to deal perpetually in formulas, he is in danger of becoming their dupe. He is apt to indulge in what another character in Dickens calls “poll-parrotting”; to repeat mechanically cant phrases—“objective” and “subjective,” “classic” and “romantic,” “organism” and “environment,” “development” and “reaction.” These are the things which Sir Leslie Stephen, with his wonted manliness and homeliness of sense, brands as “the mere banalities of criticism. I can never hear them,” he says, “without a suspicion that a professor of *Æsthetics* is trying to hood-



wink me, by a bit of technical platitude. The cant phrases which have been used so often by panegyrists, too lazy to define their terms, have become almost as meaningless as the complimentary formulæ of society." And that is just it; the man of letters is here showing the same weakness as the man of the world. For there are fashions in the library just as there are fashions in the *salon*; and the desire for imitation for imitation's sake, is common to all humanity.

And then the critic is apt to theorise "in the air," because of the constant tendency towards divorce between literature and life. Walter Bagehot makes some characteristic remarks on this point: "The reason why so few good books are written, is that few people that can write know anything. In general an author has always lived in a room, has read books, has cultivated science, is acquainted with the style and sentiments of the best authors, but is out of the way of employing his own ears and eyes. He has nothing to hear and nothing to see. His life is a vacuum. . . . He sits beside a

library-fire, with nice white paper, a good pen, a capital style, every means of saying everything, and nothing to say. . . . How dull it is to make it your business to write, to stay by yourself in a room to write, and then to have nothing to say." Something like that is very often the fate of the dramatic critic. For there are many plays which ~~are~~ are absolutely null and void. The general playgoer settles the matter quite comfortably by falling asleep over them. The critic has to say something, and in reality there is nothing to be said.

So much by way of confession of critical sins. There remain two charges constantly brought against critics which may be admitted to the full, but which, instead of being to their discredit, are really the best evidence of their good faith and their good work. These two charges are: first, lack of unanimity—the critics disagree with one another—and, second, lack of consistency—the critic will often disagree with himself. Critics, it is said, not being unanimous, cannot be representative of public opinion. As though public opinion about a play was

ever unanimous ! We must not be fooled by a noun of multitude. "Public" is one word ; it does not denote one thing. I know I spoke in my first lecture of the crowd as a whole, and sketched the general aspects of the collective mind. But the public, of course, is extraordinarily disparate in its parts. It comprises the people who applaud a play, the people who hiss it, the people who slumber through it, the people who don't know what to think about it, the people who like it because dear Angelina does, the people who dislike it because they had to forgo their after-dinner coffee in order to see it, and the people who would stay away from it if they were not paid to go. So that when criticism is unanimous, then, and only then, shall we be able to say confidently that it is not representative. But fortunately that time—that monotonous time—will never be. For in that time there will have to be absolute rules for judging works of art, applied by everybody in the same way ; all critics will possess the same principles, taste, temperament, intellectual education, moral standard, and

experience of life. Meanwhile, "with such a being as man in such a world as the present"—as Bishop Butler used to phrase it—no two critics who are thinking and feeling for themselves can be in complete agreement. We might as well complain that their faces are not alike! There is, no doubt, often a certain appearance of unanimity among critics who are not thinking for themselves but are trying to think what they suppose they ought to think or what they guess other people to be thinking, so as to shout, on Mr. Pickwick's principle, with the largest crowd. But these are critics who have mistaken their vocation. So that when Mr. Sydney Grundy asks, "When critics fall out, who shall decide?" and when Sir Henry Irving refers to "the rapture of disagreement which is served up by the dramatic critics," they ought in reality to have been gratified by the lack of unanimity which they deplore. It is evidence that the plays of the one and the acting of the other are stimulating enough to force the critics into thinking for themselves.

We have seen that while criticism as to its substance is opinion, as to its form it is art. No two opinions can be the same, because no man has the same perceptive apparatus — eye, ear, nerves, brain — as another man. Is it not notorious that no two people will agree in describing the simplest fact, the pace of an omnibus, the number of cats in the back garden? But while criticism is bound to vary, as mere record of fact, its variation is enormously increased because it is an art. Did you ever see two identical pictures of the same subject by different hands? Did you ever hear two pianists play the same sonata in the same way? Of course not, and yet there are people who seem to expect different souls to have the same adventures among the masterpieces. And if they were the same, there would still remain the variations of ability to describe them. The critic's real difficulty is that he never does describe them adequately. To adjust language with exactness to one's thoughts and impressions is an impossible feat; critics, like other writers, spend their lives

in practising it, and, like other writers, never bring the feat off.

As to the critic's want of self-consistency, that is apt in this country to bring him into sad trouble. In 1902 a provincial jury mulcted a newspaper in the sum of £100 and costs for a certain theatrical "notice," and two of the jurors wrote to the newspapers to say that the main ground of their verdict was the consideration that the notice was inconsistent with a former notice of the same play in the same quarter. If these gentlemen had been philosophers—instead of jurymen—they would have congratulated this inconsistent critic on the plain proof that he was not a mechanical recording instrument—a barometer or a pair of scales—a dead thing, but a human being with the principle of growth and life within him. They would have recognised, with a pure natural joy, that the soul never has the same adventures twice over. Nothing—to take perhaps a less humble literary example—nothing could be more interesting than to note the mental development of the well-known Danish critic, Dr.

George Brandes, in studying the works of Ibsen *pari passu* with their production. He says himself, after noting how Ibsen at different stages of his work was not the same Ibsen: "But neither was his critic quite the same. He had in the meantime gone through a great deal, and had consequently acquired a larger outlook upon life, and a more flexible emotional nature. He had dropped all the doctrines that were due to education and tradition. He understood the poet better now." A great historical instance of development in the reverse direction is that of Voltaire in regard to Shakespeare. (Voltaire began by blessing Shakespeare (with reservations), and ended by (quite unreservedly) cursing him.) That was by no means because he understood the poet better; but for reasons extraneous to his critical development, reasons connected with his objections to the course which he found the French drama was taking without his leave. And the moral of that little affair is that the critic should remain content to be an artist, and not set up for a literary dictator.

And note this about the changes in the critic's mental experience; they only reproduce in the individual what has always been happening in the race; they are the life-history, in miniature, of the whole body of criticism. For example, it has been a persistent cry of criticism throughout the ages that the present age is witnessing the decline of drama. M. Sarcey<sup>1</sup> gave a long list of theatrical pamphlets bought at a collector's sale, from which I select only a few titles and dates:—

- 1768. Causes de la décadence du théâtre.
- 1771. Du théâtre et des causes de sa décadence.
- 1807. Les causes de la décadence du théâtre.
- 1828. Considérations sur les causes de la décadence du théâtre.
- 1841. Recherches sur les causes de la décadence du théâtre.
- 1842. A quelles causes attribuer la décadence de la tragédie en France?
- 1849. De la décadence de l'art dramatique.
- 1860. De la décadence des théâtres.
- 1866. Rapport au Sénat sur la décadence de l'art dramatique.
- 1871. De la décadence des théâtres.
- 1876. Cri d'alarme sur la situation de l'art dramatique.
- 1880. Du théâtre à sauver.

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<sup>1</sup> *Quarante Ans de Théâtre*, v. i. p. 185 (Paris, 1902).



Our English critical wailings, if less numerous, have been not a whit less monotonous. The following specimens are culled, almost at random, from Mr. R. W. Lowe's "Bibliographical Account of English Theatrical Literature":<sup>1</sup>—

1819. A Letter on the decay and degradation of English theatrical literature.

1826. A nostrum for theatrical insipidity.

1853. A New Drama or we faint!!! Decline of the Drama!!!

1885. The truth about the stage; "something rotten in the, etc."

Of course the perpetual cry of the drama in decline is but the other side of a perpetual change in the theatrical consumer's taste, and, in fact, new critical demands are among the oldest things in the world. Throughout the ages there is not a dramatist of them all but has recognised, at the moment of writing, a new critical demand, a demand which was to be humoured, or derided, or temporised with, or even attributed to his own prescience and invention, as the case might be. Is there not the leading instance of Shakespeare, speaking

<sup>1</sup> London, 1888.

through the Chorus in *Henry V.*? What was his appeal to the audience for the freer exercise of their imagination but a tacit recognition of the new demand expressed by Sidney in his "Apologie for Poetry"—Sidney was one of our earliest dramatic critics—the demand for a closer verisimilitude of the scene? And did not John Webster, in his preface to *The White Devil*, openly deride the new critical demand of his age—that novelty which is a critical demand of every age? "I have noted," says he, "most of the people that come to the playhouse resemble those ignorant asses who, visiting stationers' shops, their use is not to inquire for good books, but new books." So Corneille, in his preface to *Le Cid*, temporised with the new critical demand of his time for historical fidelity, by faking up documentary evidence in favour of his story; while Racine, in his preface to *Bérénice*, defended his evasion of the new critical demand for an ingeniously invented plot, by citing the simple fables of Greek tragedy. In our later times Victor Hugo discusses the new critical demand of the

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romantic movement, the demand for the beautiful-ugly and the sublime-grotesque, in his preface to *Cromwell*; Dumas fils, in his preface to *Le Fils Naturel*, defers to a new critical demand in vaunting his aim of pressing the drama into the service of great social reforms and the great hopes of humanity; and to-day there is Mr. Bernard Shaw, who is at once a critic and a producer of drama, professedly writing plays to meet a new critical demand for a drama whose outlook upon life shall be that of a "genuinely scientific natural history."

Now what is the explanation of this perpetual variation of the critical demand? The explanation is to be found in the simple fact that the drama, being an art, shares the primary aim of all art, which is to give pleasure. And this pleasure of art, it must be borne in mind, is in the first instance—whatever higher forms it may take in the long run—a pleasure of the senses. It is not the intellectual pleasure of solving a proposition of Euclid, nor is it the moral pleasure of letting a good deed shine in a naughty world. A picture, whatever else

it does, must first please the eye; music, whatever else it does, must first please the ear. And pleasure of the senses—this is the important point—is only to be had at the price of perpetual change; for it is an elementary physiological law that the mere repetition of the same stimulus will not be followed by the same pleasurable reaction. Contrast ~~art~~, in this respect, with *pure* science or with *fundamental* morals. Pure science does not change, and cannot, so long as man remains as we know him. Have not two and two always made four, two sides of a triangle always been greater than the third, two bodies in space always attracted one another inversely as the square of the distance between them? And, so long as man remains in society as we know it, the first principles of conduct cannot change:—Thou shalt not kill, steal, bear false witness against thy neighbour. No so with art. Our pleasure-sense becomes sharpened by use, more subtle, more exacting. In order to procure the same thrill we are driven to vary and to intensify the exciting cause; or, as Mr.

Arthur Balfour has pithily expressed it in one of those amiable digressions with which he has enlivened his "Foundations of Belief"—he is actually speaking of music, but the statement may be generalised—"A steady level of æsthetic sensation can only be maintained by increasing doses of æsthetic stimulant." So true is this of the theatre that, to provide the same sum of pleasure for the spectator, dramatic interest has to go on multiplying its intensity, in the course of time, by something like a geometrical progression. Terence took two plays of Menander to make one of his own, and M. Brunetière computes that there are two of Terence's in one of Molière's, while to make a play of Dumas or Augier you have to add one of Molière's to one of Diderot's or Sedaine's.

But, it may be objected, if art is always transforming itself in response to this demand for a change of pleasure-stimulus, what about those works of art which we call classics? Are they not stable and permanent? Indeed, do we not call the very greatest classics immortal? And the

reply is, that in the existence of the classics lies the very proof of the point.\* For the virtue of a classic, the quality which gives it that rank, is the property of self-renewal, the property of responding in different ages to different demands for pleasure. Every generation refashions the classics for itself, extracting an entirely new pleasure out of them, so ~~that~~—to take only one example—you have Aristophanes praising Homer as a moralist, as a teacher of good life, and the seventeenth century admiring Homer for his “correctness,” the “nice conduct of his fable,” while the twentieth century enjoys Homer for his primitive simplicity, his fairy tale romance, and his “barbaric yaup.”

The history of all criticism then—and of dramatic criticism no less than any other species—is, and must be, a history of variations. But to compile a history is not our present affair. At the head of a long list of projected works—projected but never begun—which Johnson gave to his friend Langton and Langton presented to George III. (who must have been highly edified), stands a “History of Criticism,

as it relates to judging of authors, from Aristotle to the present age. An account of the rise and improvements of that art; of the different opinions of authors, ancient and modern." As Johnson's whole life proved insufficient for that adventure, one may hope to stand excused for not attempting a history of dramatic criticism in a brief course of lectures. Enough if it be found possible within our narrow limits to glance at this Aristotle, with whom Johnson would, as in duty bound, have begun, and to trace the vicissitudes through the ages of one or two of his leading ideas. Many of those ideas have kept steadily travelling in the world up to this moment—though I think we shall find that, as Voltaire said of something else, they have become *diablement changées en route*. For I cannot help suspecting a certain spice of exaggeration in much current talk about the "modernity" of Aristotle. You have, for example, Mr. Herbert Paul, an accomplished scholar and a most sagacious critic, roundly declaring that "Aristotle is of all Greeks the most modern," and that his *Poetics* are "intensely

modern." But what is meant by saying that an old author is "modern"? Surely, that the "whirligig of time" has turned full circle, that the author's opportunity has come up again, through some quality of his mind or temper which makes him peculiarly at home in our own day. Thus a good deal of Montaigne may justly be called "modern" in this age of introspection and Bashkirtseffism. In the same way some of the little intimate passages in Euripides seem strangely "modern" in this age of "naturalistic" literature. But that is not the sense in which you can apply the word "modern" to Aristotle; I think we shall by-and-by encounter another Greek critic who, in that sense, was very much more "modern." Those things in Aristotle which are valid and fresh to-day are not more valid than they were in the day of Elizabeth, or than they were in the day of Louis XIV. It is, for such things, a case of the eternal verities, not the case of Sir Roger de Coverley's coat, which had been in and out of the fashion a dozen times. Euclid is true to-day, but he is not accurately to



be described as "intensely modern." And mention of Euclid recalls the other mistake which has been persistently made in dealing with Aristotle: the reverencing of all his leading ideas as though they were even something more than eternal verities, as though they were holy sacraments. Thus to Lessing he was as true as Euclid. In his "Hamburg Dramaturgy" Lessing said: "I do not hesitate to confess (even if in these enlightened times I am to be laughed out of countenance for it) that I hold the *Poetics* to be infallible as Euclid's *Elements*." And not so very long before Lessing's time, Dacier had objected to some one who had ventured to set up the Bible against Aristotle: "As if Divinity and the Holy Scriptures could ever be contrary to the sentiments of Nature on which Aristotle founds his judgment!" This was only giving another form to Roger Bacon's observation that "Aristotle hath the same authority in philosophy as the Apostle Paul hath in divinity." So that, after all, it was not so very much of a farcical exaggeration when Racine in *Les Plaideurs* made an

advocate attempt to browbeat the bench with the authority of Aristotle in a case of fowl-stealing. Why, in one of the liveliest literary controversies of 1902, Mr. Churton Collins, another scholarly critic, singled out some criterion of Aristotle's, and said we must apply it "to all drama of classical quality." Now this is flying in the face of Aristotle himself. For Aristotle, throughout the *Poetics*, was professedly examining a particular species of tragedy at a certain stage of its growth. Matthew Arnold, in his preface to *Merope*, brings out this point in his own delightful, easy way. "The laws of Greek tragic art," says Arnold, "are not exclusive; they are for Greek dramatic art itself, but they do not pronounce other modes of dramatic art unlawful. . . . 'Tragedy,' says Aristotle, in a remarkable passage, 'after going through many changes, got the nature which suited it, and then it stopped. Whether or no the kinds of tragedy are yet exhausted,' he presently adds, 'tragedy being considered either in itself, or in respect to the stage, I shall not now inquire.' Travelling in a certain path,

the spirit of man arrived at Greek tragedy ; travelling in other paths, it may arrive at other kinds of tragedy."

Well, the spirit of man has, in fact, arrived at other kinds of tragedy, so that we must now resign ourselves to the historical view of Aristotle's *Poetics*. It will be our business, then, to consider some of his leading ideas as relative to the conditions of his time, and to trace the ups-and-downs of their course through the shifting conditions of later times. By this means we ought to get at any rate a bird's-eye view of what dramatic criticism has been in the past, and we may thus hope to be in a better position to ask how precisely it stands at the present day.

### III

## OLD AND NEW CRITICISM

### III

FIRST, then, Aristotle's general point of view, the whole mood in which he approached art was, in an important respect, quite unlike ours. For Aristotle, mighty intellect though his was, could not let his intellect play *in vacuo*. He was a man of his time, and his time was not, like ours, a time wherein a clear distinction is seen between nature and art, between the practical and the æsthetic. To-day the æsthetic mood and the practical mood are very different. We have had a Schopenhauer to tell us that art marks off for us the world as idea from the world as will; it is life purged of the will-to-live. The æsthetic mood is a disinterested mood, and the feelings excited by a work of art—so far as art is directly concerned—are ends in themselves, enjoyed for their own sake, without the sequel of action, their natural

sequel in real life. In one of the Goncourt novels—*Manette Salomon*—there is the incident of a model, posing before a room full of art-students for what Trilby called “the altogether,” who was suddenly covered with confusion by the sight of a stranger peeping in at the window. The students were nothing to the model, who knew that they were in the æsthetic, the “disinterested” mood, just as though they were copying a statue; the Peeping Tom, however, would be in the very different mood of real life. Even to-day there are people who treat art just as they treat reality, because they are incapable of the æsthetic mood. Thomas Love Peacock in “Crotchet Castle” alludes to what was then the recent case of a cheesemonger who had broken the plaster-cast of a Venus over the head of its itinerant vendor. What was more, the Justice of the Peace sided with him. There are some remote circles where novels, all novels, are still accounted wicked because they speak of things untrue, that is, which have not actually happened. Now this, or something like this; was the common atti-

tude of Greek criticism. To the Greek art really was second nature; an inferior, because a copied, a second-hand nature. He applied the same moral criteria indifferently to art and real life, the image and the object. Hence Greek criticism, being always coloured by this moralistic tinge, differed strangely from ours. Solon is said to have asked Thespis, that very early actor-manager, how he could tell so many lies before so many people. For Plato stories, in our own sense, were "stories" in what is still at times the nursery sense, that is, fibs. There was the same confusion of thought in Aristotle, so that the modern reader is constantly feeling *dépayé*. Why, he asks himself, must the hero of a tragedy be neither very good nor very bad? Why must his fate be determined by error and not by wickedness? Why ought the culminating fatality of a tragedy to be the work of ignorance, and its true nature only to be discovered afterwards? What are we to make of such a distinction as this between tragedy and comedy—that the

latter aims at representing worse people, and the former better people, than those of present reality? It is the moralistic attitude, the absence of the disinterested æsthetic mood, which explains these mysteries. Aristotle would have ruled out not only Iago and Richard III. but Cordelia and Desdemona.

This was what came of identifying art with practical life. Nowadays we have got so far from this point of view, as, in certain moods, to consider practical life as an æsthetic spectacle, as a more intense kind of art than art itself. Thus Burke says a playhouse where the best tragedy was being acted would at once be emptied by the news that a state-execution was about to take place in the adjoining square. And Renan talks of all life as an æsthetic spectacle: "This universe is a spectacle which the Deity offers Himself; let us carry out the intentions of the great Choregus in contributing to make the spectacle as brilliant, as varied as possible."

These ideas of Aristotle, I say, seem to us moderns very strange. And they seemed



strange, but not so strange, when tragedy was "hatched again," and "hatched different," as Mrs. Poyser would put it, in France. They seemed strange to Corneille, who discussed the *Poetics* with great acumen. At that time—and in that place—it would have been impious to assert flatly that Aristotle was wrong; all that people could venture to contend was that his meaning had been wrongly interpreted. Did I not say that every generation re-fashions the classics for itself? And so you have Corneille, troubled by the Aristotelian *dictum* that the morals of the tragic hero must be good, unable to hide the fact that many of his own tragic heroes and heroines infringed this law—you have Corneille giving a new interpretation to the word "good." By "good morals," he says, Aristotle must have meant "the brilliant and lofty character of a virtuous or vicious nature, according as that nature is proper and suitable to the personage." In other words, "good" meant any appropriate character, so long as it was marked by tragic dignity. You will see that this was to empty Aristotle's

law of all its moral content. In like manner Corneille sought to turn Aristotle's position that the tragic hero must not be entirely good, that people must not be made to suffer on the stage through no fault of their own. But—here is something to show the persistency of Aristotelian ideas—nearly a century after Corneille you have Lessing protesting against his attempt to warp the meaning of Aristotle, and reasserting that the spectacle of an entirely good character brought to woe was what Aristotle called it—*μιαρόν*, shocking. And if you want a still later instance of this view, you have it in the case of the old Sheriff of Dumbarton known to Louis Stevenson, who could not bear even to read *Othello*. "That noble gentleman . . . that noble lady . . . too painful for me!"

A more vigorous offshoot from this ethical criticism of the Greeks was the notion that drama ought to aim at directly inculcating a moral. This notion permeated all eighteenth-century commentary and a good deal of eighteenth-century practice. Thus Johnson praised *Timon of Athens* because

“the catastrophe affords a very powerful warning against ostentatious liberality”; and he hinted some dispraise of *As You Like It* because “by hastening to the end of the work, Shakespeare suppressed the dialogue between the usurper and the hermit, and lost an opportunity of exhibiting a moral lesson, in which he might have found matter worthy of his highest powers.” Johnson also preferred Tate’s *Lear* to Shakespeare’s—Tate, you may remember, gave Cordelia’s story a happy ending—because it showed “the final triumph of persecuted virtue.” But the great champion of the didactic, or hortatory, drama was Diderot, who wrote: “It is always virtue and virtuous people that a man ought to have in view when he writes. Oh, what good would men gain if all the arts of imitation possessed one common object, and were one day to unite with the laws in making us love virtue and hate vice!” And so in his *Père de Famille* Diderot introduces a father who addresses his daughter thus: “Marriage, my daughter, is a vocation imposed by heaven. . . . If marriage exposes us to cruel pain, it

is also the source of the sweetest pleasures. . . . O sacred bond, if I think of thee, my whole soul is warmed and elevated." "But these virtuous ejaculations," says Mr. John Morley—from whose volume on Diderot I have borrowed this quotation, and upon whose comment it would be presumptuous in me to attempt any improvement—"these virtuous ejaculations do not warm and elevate us. In such a case words count for nothing. It is actual presentation of beautiful character, and not talk about it, that touches the spectator. It is the association of interesting action with character that moves and inspires such better moods as may be within our compass. Diderot, like many other people before and since, sought to make the stage the great moral teacher. That it may become so is possible. It will not be," concludes Mr. Morley, "by imitating the methods of that colossal type of histrionic failure, the church-pulpit!" Allusion to the church pulpit reminds one that the Rev. Jeremy Collier, in his "Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage," laid it down that "the

business of plays is to recommend virtue and discountenance vice." This moralistic position need not surprise us in a clergyman. But what is surprising is that a man like Vanbrugh, in his reply to Collier, should have accepted this position as a matter of course. It never occurred to him to say, with Falstaff, "I deny your major"; all that he could find to say was: "What I have done is in general a discouragement to vice and folly; I am sure that I intended it, and I hope I have performed it." So you see that Lamb's defence of the Restoration drama on the ground that it was unreal, a sort of fairy tale, something to which the ethical criteria of actual life were irrelevant, could never have occurred to the Restoration dramatists themselves. With Lamb you have at least reached the very opposite pole to the moralistic criticism of Aristotle. You have reached un-moralistic criticism.

For a still more striking piece of evidence that modern thought cannot get away from Aristotle—that criticism may be with him or may be against him but cannot ignore

him—take the Aristotelian dictum about the relative importance of character and plot. There was a great to-do over this in the summer of 1902. The trouble began with a statement of a *Quarterly* reviewer about the essential thing in drama. “The essential thing in drama,” said he, “is that the drama should be based on character, that the actions should be made by the characters.” This remark “drew” several scholastic critics, who sought to floor the reviewer with the *Poetics*, as Johnson is said to have knocked down Osborne the bookseller with a folio. Here is the Aristotelian text:—

“Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life. . . . Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character; character comes in as subsidiary to the action. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. . . . The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul

of a tragedy; character holds the second place."

Now the scholastic critics I have alluded to one and all argued as though this passage meant that character-development was less artistically important, less interesting, than plot-weaving; and there, I humbly think, they were all wrong. I venture to submit to you a very different interpretation of this passage, a sense in which Aristotle's words are absolutely valid for all drama in all time. It is that Aristotle here was not attempting an artistic appreciation at all, but making a scientific classification. He was marking off the special province of drama in the general region of art. The *differentia* of drama, what makes it itself and not something else, he shows, is action. If it were not action but character, then the "Caractères" of La Bruyère would be drama, and the description of the Club in the opening numbers of the *Spectator* would be drama, and Elia's sketch of George Dyer would be drama. But characters are isolated forces, forces *in vacuo*. To make drama these forces must come into collision;

mathematically speaking, drama is a department of kinetics, not of statics. In other words, Aristotle is only anticipating M. Brunetière's consideration of drama as the struggle of a will against obstacles. And the proof, says Aristotle, is that you cannot have drama without action, though you may without character. Melodrama—that is, mechanical tragedy—presents action without character. And there are not wanting duellards who would contend that the opposite case, character without action, is illustrated by some plays of Ibsen. These are the people who are for ever talking as though action must be something external and  
 ✓ | strepitous; they are not satisfied unless the hero smashes the furniture or the heroine pushes her husband down a well. But these people were answered long ago, once and for all, by Dryden, a very great dramatic critic—in some respects, I almost think, the greatest since Aristotle—and I am not forgetting Lessing, for while Dryden's erudition equalled Lessing's, his criticism is more robust, more mundane, less academic. . . .



I wish I could have dwelt upon Dryden, not merely upon that wonderful thing of which I have already spoken, the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, with its exquisite little "impressionist" vignettes, its spirited dialectic, its noble liberality of taste, but also upon those critical defences, dedications, discourses, parallels, accompanying his plays, and now so much more valuable to us than, with scarce an exception, the plays themselves. But I could not, within my prescribed limits; it came to a choice between Aristotle and Dryden, and about that choice there could be no hesitation. . . . Well, Dryden effectually answered the people who talk as though action must be something external. "Every alteration," says one of the interlocutors in his great *Essay*—"every alteration or crossing of a design, every new-sprung passion, and turn of it, is a part of the action, and much the noblest, except we conceive nothing to be action till the players come to blows." This spiritual plot, this internal will-conflict, these soul-adventures, were all comprised in the Aristotelian "action."

If more light is wanted on this subject, it may again be found in Dryden. In some marginal notes scribbled upon the blank leaves of a copy of Rymer's "Remarks on the Tragedies of the Last Age"—which came into the possession of Garrick, who gave it to Johnson, who in his "Life of Dryden" published the annotations—Dryden wrote:—"Aristotle places the fable first; not *quoad dignitatem*, sed *quoad fundamentum*." What is that but a pithy confirmation of the view just advanced that Aristotle, in giving the first place to plot, was not attempting an artistic appreciation but a scientific classification?

If Aristotle had been content with his scientific classification all would have been well. Unfortunately he was not content; he subsequently founded on it a piece, a very queer piece, of technical instruction. Plot, it seemed, had to come first in order of composition. "As for the story," he says, "whether the poet takes it ready made or constructs it for himself, he should first sketch its general outline, and then fill in the episodes and amplify in detail." He

proceeds to illustrate by the story of the *Iphigenia*. Now, to-day I think it would be held that the play or the novel—for Aristotle's remarks here cover all fiction—originates and grows up in the author's mind in all sorts of ways. Aristotle's way, far from being the only, is probably the worst, way. Is not inventing a plot and then finding characters to fit it rather like the soldier's recipe for making a cannon—first you make a hole and then you pour gun-metal round it? Robert Louis Stevenson, however, seems to have admitted the possibility. He once told Mr. Balfour, his biographer, that a novelist might devise a plot and find characters to suit; or he might reverse the process; or, finally, he might take a certain atmosphere and get both persons and actions to express it. Yes, the novelist—or dramatist—may select any one of these three courses, but his choice is not, I fancy, a matter of indifference. What—to take only one instance—what is the secret of the unsatisfactory impression left by so many of our thesis (or so-called •problem)• plays, if it be not

the feeling that the playwright has first thought of his thesis, his subject, his action as Aristotle would say, and has then fitted his characters to it? He has aimed at proving a case by manufacturing the evidence, and at the same time has spoiled our illusion by an obviously artificial pattern, something too symmetrical for resemblance to what Mr. Henry James calls "the strange irregular rhythm of life."

Why Aristotle overstated the case for plot, as compared with character, is a point not, I dare say, beyond conjecture. One may hazard the speculation that, in the actual life of his age, incidents, adventures, all the raw material of plot, fell more frequently within the experience of even the average man than they fall now. The "revolutions" and "discoveries" of Greek tragedy which are now relegated to melodrama — the long-lost heir, the "strawberry-mark," and all the rest of it — were not then by any means improbable. On the other hand, human character cannot then have been the complex thing it has since become. Further, it is quite

ossible that Aristotle detected a tendency in the tragedy of his day which he held dangerous to its vitality—the tendency to the merely statuesque, to sheer immobility. If so, his over-statement of the case for the other side was nothing less than a piece of that practical wisdom which we call opportunism. Even to-day the drama of motionless life has beguiled some men to heresy; M. Maeterlinck made his ideal in his “Static Theatre”—the very negation of all drama.

And now let us turn to an Aristotelian point which has quite another kind of interest for us—an interest arising not from any queer application of it, but from its curious, its almost total, neglect. Aristotle mentions two ways of judging tragedy—in itself and in relation to the stage (*πρὸς τὰ θεάτρα*). By *τὰ θεάτρα* he means the audience as well as the “boards”—the whole “house,” as we should say, before and behind the curtain. Now dramatic criticism in general, and Shakespearian criticism in particular, has been continuously vitiated by the neglect to consider

drama πρὸς τὰ θέατρα, in relation, that is, to the practical conditions of the stage and the audience. Corneille complained of the misrepresentations of Aristotle by scholars who were ignorant of the play-house; and this particular ignorance has been equally fatal to an adequate interpretation of dramatic history. Only one conspicuous critic in the past has given full recognition to this important side of the question, and that is a man of the Italian Renaissance, Lodovico Castelvetro. Castelvetro's main points<sup>1</sup> were that not only the form, but the content of the drama was conditioned by the fact that it is something transacted in a public place before a motley crowd upon a circumscribed space within a limited time. He drew certain conclusions, with which we need not trouble ourselves because they are now out of date; his interest for us is that he had the right method; the root of the matter was in him. On the other hand, to this day you will find critics in-

<sup>1</sup> See *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, by Joel Elias Springarn (New York, 1899), p. 72.

ating Shakespeare's plays, and comparing them with modern plays, without consideration of the stage and the audience which Shakespeare had to write for or of the difference between the stage and the audience as they were then and as they are now. They take exclusively the bookman's view.

Thus you will find a University Professor earnestly telling us we must appreciate Shakespeare by the text alone. "We are sure," he says, "that if we have the wit to see it, we shall find in the text the key to every problem which the story suggests." Just apply this precious principle to solving the question why so much of the Shakespearian text ignores the fact that we should now call the law of dramatic economy, does not help on the action, but consists of moral reflections, monologues, speeches "improving the occasion." Examples of this element of the drama — which in the Aristotelian analysis is called *διάνοια* — are Hamlet's soliloquy on drunkenness, while he is waiting for the ghost, his lecture on act-

ing to the players, Polonius' advice to Laertes, and Jacques' Seven Ages speech. Well, I defy our University Professor or any one else adequately to explain why this element in Shakespeare and the other Elizabethans has disappeared in modern drama, or to indicate when it disappeared, without consideration of a certain little change in the mechanical conditions of the stage—namely, the gradual disappearance of the “apron.” The “apron” is the technical name for the stage-area in front of the curtain. In the Elizabethan theatre it jutted right out among the public, who surrounded it on three sides. This “apron” slowly shrank—Colley Cibber writes that it was shortened by 10 feet in his time<sup>1</sup>—till at last in our day it has altogether disappeared, and the drama has withdrawn within the frame of the proscenium. While the apron existed you had a platform-drama, rhetorical recitation in costume, instead of the actual representa-

<sup>1</sup> When Rich altered the structure of Drury Lane in order to get more room for his pit. See *Life of Thomas Betterton*, by R. W. Lowe (London, 1891), p. 27.



tion of our modern picture-drama. The "apron" was like the shagreen skin in Balzac's story; as it shrank, the life of the old rhetoric-drama drew so much nearer to its end. The disappearance of the "apron" is of course not the only cause of difference between Elizabethan and modern drama; but a cause it is, and an important one. Our "bookmen" have overlooked it, because they cannot be got to consider the drama, in Aristotle's phrase, πρὸς τὰ θέατρα, in relation to the actual circumstances of the theatre.

It would be easy to multiply examples of the "bookman's" besetting sin: his incorrigible habit of explaining plays by play-books or books about plays without reference to playhouses and playgoers. There is, for instance, that famous appeal to the imagination of the audience in the "Chorus" speeches of *Henry V.*, in which the "bookmen" represent Shakespeare as talking at the "classic" critics of that day, the strict Unitarians of Place and Time, whereas we, I think, looking at the actual scenic conditions of the Elizabethan stage,

with its unchanging background, and at the actual mental condition of the Elizabethan audience, which in mobility, in detachment, was very different from ours—looking, I say, at these conditions of the time, we should, I think, find that Shakespeare was not wasting his breath by talking at anybody, but was trying to mitigate a very real difficulty, to talk over a very real recalcitrancy in his public. Then, again, there is the question of the fights, and wrestling-matches, and slaughterings in Shakespeare's plays—in all Elizabethan drama—which the “bookmen” put down to some deliberate artistic preference in the playwright; whereas we, I think, looking at the playhouse and its circumstances, shall have to say they were there because the Elizabethan public insisted upon them, and insisted upon them for no æsthetic reason whatever, but just because it was accustomed to them, sometimes on that very spot—on theatrical off-nights—and at other times in the playing-fields just outside. It would be easy, I repeat, to

multiply examples of commentary running wild for lack of that controlling principle mentioned by Aristotle, the principle of considering the drama *πρὸς τὰ θέατρα*. But I will not proceed with any such multiplication; for it is time to have done with Aristotle and his *Poetics*. If I have dwelt so long on that masterpiece, it was that I might bring out the element of permanence in the history of criticism, the fact that it has dealt through the ages with the same sort of questions, always having them in its mind—though perpetually changing its mind about them. I must, however, entreat your indulgence for one more reference to a Greek—a successor of Aristotle—merely a passing reference, because this later Greek, though he occasionally touched upon dramatic *diction*, did not deal with drama; but a reference which is obligatory, because he offers a kind of criticism very different from Aristotle's, and above all things different in that it can with propriety be called "modern." I refer to Longinus, whom Dryden calls (in his

"Apology for Heroic Poetry") "undoubtedly, after Aristotle, the greatest critic among the Greeks." Aristotle had been a pioneer, an explorer; he had mapped out the country. His great business was classification; he was the first of scientific critics. But Longinus, as I say, was of a different sort. Precisely of what sort Longinus was you may learn from a note in Gibbon's Diary for 3rd October 1762: "Till now," says Gibbon, "I was acquainted only with two ways of criticising a beautiful passage, the one to show by an exact anatomy of it the distinct beauties of it, and whence they sprang; the other, an idle exclamation, or general encomium, which leaves nothing behind it. Longinus has shown me that there is a third. He tells me his own feelings upon reading it; and he tells them with such energy that he communicates them." Longinus, then, narrated the adventures of his soul among masterpieces, he set down his impressions; he was the first of impressionist critics. That character at once brings him alongside an Anatole France or a Jules

Lemaître; it carries us into the thick of "modernity."<sup>1</sup>

Gibbon, as you have seen, divided critics into three classes, and a great contemporary of Gibbon's also divided them into three. Johnson told Fanny Burney—who records it in her diary—that "There are three distinct kinds of judges upon all new authors or productions; the first are those who know no rules, but pronounce entirely from their natural taste and feelings; the second are those who know, and judge by rules; and the third are those who know, but are above the rules. These last," said Johnson, "are those you should wish to satisfy. Next to these rate the natural judges; but ever despise those opinions that are formed by the rules." Now I shall take leave to reduce these three classes to two; for the first class, those people who knowing no rules are at the mercy of their undisciplined taste, do not concern us here;

<sup>1</sup> For the "impressionism" of Longinus see Professor Saintsbury's "History of Criticism," vol. ii. p. 373 (London, 1902). Mr Andrew Lang in his Introduction to Mr. H. L. Havell's translation of Longinus on the Sublime (London, 1899) takes a somewhat different view.

they are not critics, in our sense of the term, at all. There remain, then, two classes of critics.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, there are those who judge by "the rules," by a code of orthodox canons and standards, by some law of taste external to their own, and independent of it. On the other hand, there are those who, while they have informed and fortified and purified their taste by the preliminary discipline of study—study of the works satisfying orthodox standards, study of "the rules"—nevertheless form their opinions upon no external laws of taste, but upon the report brought to them by their own taste, their own sensations and impressions. These are the two chief schools of criticism to-day—the brunt of the battle is between them—the "dogmatic" critics and the "impressionist" critics. In the process of comparing<sup>1</sup> these two schools we may perhaps find that there is not so much difference between them as they themselves suppose.

<sup>1</sup> For some points in the comparison I am indebted to M. Émile Faguet; Feuilleton of the *Journal des Débats* for 20th June 1896.

The "dogmatic" critic is by temperament an "intellectual." Understanding, not feeling, is his point. He does not share his feelings with us, as Gibbon said Longinus did, but his ideas. There is the possibility of ample pleasure for us in that, but it is an intellectual pleasure—the pleasure given by a symmetrical or strictly logical ordering of ideas, by subtle disquisition, by what the mathematicians call a "neat" or an "elegant" demonstration. The pleasure for the critic of this sort is to classify, and to compare. Such-and-such a play belongs to this or that dramatic family, or holds a certain rank in the dramatic hierarchy. *Hamlet*, being a tragedy, is "nobler," as Aristotle would have said, than *Much Ado*, a comedy. Or you will be shown the "periodicity" of dramatic motives: how *Hamlet* is largely a modern *Oresteia*, how the *Adelphi* of Terence reappears as *A Pair of Spectacles*. Or the play, morally considered, belongs to a wholesome, or a pernicious, or a frivolous class. It is always a classification this critic gives you, a classification to accord with general ideas

of art, or sociology, or ethics; every work this critic sees he sees *through* his general idea. He is judging—First Prize, Class A; Second Prize, Class B; Proxime Accessit or “Ploughed”—judging, not feeling.

But if he does chance to have feelings—and even this temperament can hardly escape them altogether—he regards his feelings with distrust. You seem to overhear him saying to himself: “I like this play, therefore I am prompted to call it good; but my general ideas tell me it belongs to a bad class, therefore I must call it bad. Evidently then, despite the evidence of my senses, I can’t really like it.” And the good man, flushed with the pride of a victory over self, a mortification of the flesh, loudly damns the play to drown the last echoes of his own spontaneous, human feelings.

To reinforce his judgments—for judicial decisions must have the sanction of something external to the judge—he calls in tradition, the “rules.” This undoubtedly gives him an air of authority. He seems to be broad-based upon the people’s will;



he comes before us not as himself, but as the representative of a "thumping majority." That is the dogmatic critic.

The "impressionist" critic has greater interest in his feelings and less confidence in his general ideas and external authority. His fundamental principle is the fact that we are all, whether we know it or not, shut up within ourselves. It was in answering M. Brunetière, who has constituted himself the champion—and a very doughty champion—of the dogmatists, that M. Anatole France insisted upon this fundamental principle. "There is no objective criticism any more than there is objective art, and all those who flatter themselves that they put something else than themselves into their work are the dupes of the cheapest illusion. The truth is, we never get out of ourselves. That is one of our greatest miseries. What would we not give for one minute to see heaven and earth with the faceted eye of a fly, or to comprehend nature with the rude and simple brain of an orang-outang? But that is denied to us. We cannot, like Tiresias, be a

man and yet remember we have been a woman. We are shut up in our own person as in some perpetual prison-house. The best thing we can do, it occurs to me, is to recognise this frightful limitation with a good grace, and to confess that we are speaking of ourselves — whenever we have not the strength to hold our tongues." Now there is of course some exaggeration here — or rather, some misdirection. As M. Brunetière had no difficulty in showing, M. France has drawn the red herring of metaphysics across the track. The fact that the external universe is only known through the Ego does not prevent normally constituted men from arriving at a common judgment about innumerable things in the universe. M. France's argument, in fact, proves too much; it would invalidate not only objective criticism, but all history, all science. At the same time it proves too little, for it covers only our personal contribution to an act of criticism, it leaves out the contribution of the ages, the "something not ourselves."

Nevertheless, this self-concentration, or introspective habit, of the "impressionist" critic has the supreme merit of genuineness, of veracity. The great drawback of so-called "objective" criticism is its tendency to self-deception, to say nothing of hypocrisy. We take judgments on trust instead of testing them by our actual experience. We cheat ourselves of our pleasures, out of fear of some external prohibition, or else we fool ourselves into thinking we like a work, when in reality we do not, just because we suppose that according to "the rules" we ought to like it. To this very common attitude of mind there is a characteristic reference by Dickens in one of his letters written to Forster from Venice. Dickens says how necessary it is for a man "to overcome the villainous meanness of professing what other people have professed when he knows (if he has capacity to originate an opinion) that his profession is untrue.. The intolerable nonsense against which genteel taste and subserviency are afraid to rise, in connexion with art, is astounding." . . . (You are told) "on pain

of being broke for want of gentility in appreciation, to go into ecstasies ; . . . you immediately obey, and tell your son to obey. He tells his son, and he tells his, and so the world gets at three-fourths of its frauds and miseries." Well, our safeguard against these frauds and miseries is "impressionist" criticism. The "impressionist" takes a pure natural joy in his own sensations, because they are his own. He declines to be "connoisseured out of his senses." He asks himself, "Do I really like this work? Whether it pleased my great-grandfathers or not—does it please me? And if it does, then I cannot explain my pleasure to others—in Gibbon's phrase about Longinus, tell my feelings with such energy that I communicate them—unless I explain myself, my temperament." And so the "impressionist" is committed to an analysis of self, to the psychology of the Ego. He "narrates the adventures of his soul."

Thereupon there is often a shrill outcry against him. Egoist! Where is your modesty? Keep yourself to yourself! Thus at a Congress of Journalists in 1902

a veteran provincial editor, lecturing the dramatic critics upon their duties—a popular pastime — sternly enjoined absolute silence about the Ego. Well, I cannot but think that those who raise this cry misunderstand the very nature of criticism. I waive the point that the real immodesty lies not with those who pretend to speak only for themselves, but with those who profess to speak in the general name. I waive the point that the reader often objects to “egoism” in the critic merely because it offends his own egoism, because there is a collision of *amours propres*. I waive the plea for autobiographic criticism which is included in the plea for autobiography at large—that it is, as Sir Leslie Stephen says, the one subject upon which the writer happens to be the highest living authority. But the fact remains that to give an account of your impressions without any account of the temperament which has been impressed, is to withhold from your reader an essential piece of evidence for enabling him to form his own judgment about them. The value of your impressions will depend upon your

approximation to that ideal consumer of art, described at the outset of this inquiry, *ὁ χαριεὺς* of Aristotle; it is for you to provide your reader with the necessary materials for making up his mind about you; you must produce your credentials.

And your "authority" with the reader? It will not be found in an external set of laws, traditions, "the rules"; it will be in the delicacy, the fineness, the distinction, of your impressions. They are for the reader to take or to leave. He may say: "No, I don't feel like that, but comparison of my own feelings with this man's has helped me to realise my own pleasure more clearly"; or he may say: "Yes, that is what I vaguely feel, the knowledge of this man's feelings has illuminated, expanded, warmed, and invigorated my own." There is the critic's "authority"—the interest, the "use" of criticism.

And now, after this contrast of the two opposed schools of criticism, it is time to warn you that it has only been made for the sake of clearing up our ideas and must not be taken too seriously. Unmitigated

dogmatism, absolute impressionism—there are no such things. Your most hardened dogmatist is at times an impressionist—at times when he is driven in upon himself, when his classifications, his references to general principles, break down, and he is left to speak for himself, to say, “I am so constituted that I cannot help liking this or disliking that”—“I do not like thee, Dr. Fell, But why it is I cannot tell.” After all, his general classifications are subjective, for the simple reason that no two critics have ever chosen exactly the same set. And so it is with the most independent impressionist; he cannot—whatever M. France may say— isolate himself from humanity, from the ambient air, from the mass of literary tradition and dogma and the code of artistic right and wrong, better and worse, which is the heritage from our fathers that begat us. In either kind of critic it all comes back in the last resort to a question of temperament; whether they be impressionists or dogmatists, it is in virtue of their temperament, the true inwardness of them, that they please and persuade us.

It is by their temperament that we shall rank the men of either kind, or refuse to rank them, among the elect of criticism,—“the *judices natos*,” as Dryden calls them (in his Dedication of the *Æneid*): “souls of the highest rank and truest understanding. These,” says he, “are few in number; but whoever is so happy as to gain their approbation can never lose it, because they never give it blindly. Then they have a certain magnetism in their judgment, which attracts others to their sense. Every day they gain some new proselyte, and in time become the Church.” When we clearly perceive that ideal of good criticism, we can all I think assent to what Tennyson said, almost on his deathbed—“Good critics are rarer than good authors.”

But Tennyson said, at an earlier time, something else, something which points to a limitation of even the best criticism and to an excuse for even the worst authors. Some one had quoted to him a prayer of Jowett's, praying that we might see ourselves as others see us. “No,” replied Tennyson, “I should not pray for that:



others cannot see much of one's inner self." Criticism should always allow for that; it cannot pierce to the author's inmost self. Life is so obscure a thing that there is a sense in which all criticism is futile and impertinent. Who can plumb the ocean of thought and feeling of which any man's written words are but the surface-foam? The artist abandons himself, in Goethe's phrase, to his *dæmon*; what may seem to us failures, incongruities, are but necessary parts of an inward and spiritual harmony of the man, which remains hidden from us. And so, as M. Paul Bourget says in speaking of Amiel, "There is in every productive energy something mysterious and sacred, which it behoves us to consider as above discussion and judgment."

THE END

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